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The United States Needs to Expand Security Cooperation with Honduras

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On January 24, 2014, Honduran President-elect Juan Orlando Hernández is set to take the oath of office. This inauguration comes at a time when the Central American nation is in the midst of the worst security and financial crisis of its existence. Drug trafficking organizations and related violence have elevated murder rates in Honduras to the highest in the world.¹ Along with the violence is the growing problem of gangs and cartels that spill over its borders and hinder economic development throughout the region.

United States security assistance in the region is largely dictated by the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI). CARSI was designed to supplement the Mexican-focused counterdrug and anti-crime Mérida Initiative and, as such, largely responds to security issues on a country-specific level rather than a regional one.² Additionally, under the Obama Administration, funding for security operations has been inconsistent, which has diminished aerial interdiction capabilities.

The stability, security, and economic development of Honduras are in the national interest of the United States. Since the 1980s, the country has been a regional ally in the United States' military opera-

tions. Alongside its regional counterparts, Honduras is an integral part of the Dominican Republic–Central America–United States Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA–DR), which combined represents one of the United States' largest trading partners.

Honduras is at a critical juncture, and the United States should reorient its Honduran policy accordingly. The inauguration of Juan Orlando Hernández presents an opportunity for the Obama Administration to highlight its commitment to regional security efforts and reestablish the U.S. as the regional leader in counternarcotics cooperation.

Central America's Northern Triangle and Honduras. Rampant levels of crime and violence in Central America's Northern Triangle (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) have reached a critical point. At the epicenter of this trend is Honduras where violent crime has been skyrocketing since 2009, seemingly unabated. Diminishing state resources and weak state institutions inhibit Honduras's ability to combat these threats. Increasing levels of drug-related violence and the corruption of legal institutions continue to undermine the government's capacity. A multitude of transnational criminal organizations like the Mexican Zetas and Sinaloa drug cartels have capitalized on the state's institutional weakness and are now fully operational within the country.³ As a result, the U.S. Peace Corps was forced to terminate operations in January 2012.

The economic cost of crime and violence are astounding as analysts estimate a loss of 10.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP). The weak economic conditions have resulted in extensive unemployment and underemployment,

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and large-scale migration to other countries in the region and to the United States further deepens the loss of economic opportunities. According to the Department of Homeland Security, Honduras is the fastest growing source country for unlawful immigrants: From 2000–2011, there was a 132 percent increase in the number of unlawful immigrants entering America from there.⁴

Suspension of Foreign Assistance. Under the Obama Administration, the United States has been an inconsistent partner and inadvertently has played a role in Honduras’s downward spiral. Following Honduras’s constitutional crisis of 2009, the United States suspended critical aid and joint military operations, largely in the form of counter-narcotics assistance. Land, sea, and air counter-narcotics operations were weakened and along the Caribbean coast virtually halted. The subsequent security vacuum along the Caribbean coastline was quickly filled by drug trafficking organizations.

In September 2012, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights Maria Otero signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Honduran Foreign Affairs Minister Arturo Corrales, a critical component of which is cooperation on drug interdiction. In early 2012, the United States and Honduras conducted Operation Anvil, a joint aerial interdiction operation. Funding for this highly effective and internationally regarded operation has been suspended by the Appropriations Subcommittee on the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs. Without the United States’ support for counternarcotic operations, drugs continue flowing into the United States through Honduras via Guatemala and Mexico.⁵

What the United States Should Do. High levels of widespread violence and crime, weak state institutions, and diminishing economic capacity are critical issues that need to be addressed by Honduras’s new government. Rather than allowing these problems to fester or create insurmountable obstacles for the new Hernández administration, the United States needs to be proactive in its approach and work jointly to address these issues head on. Accordingly, the Obama Administration should construct a long-term strategic relationship with Honduras by:

- **Releasing funds for aerial interdiction programs.** The United States and Honduras have a common interest in stemming the upward flow of narcotics along the isthmus. Honduras is currently the transit point for 79 percent of northbound South American drug flights. The Appropriations Subcommittee should immediately release these funds. Also, considering the increasing role Mexican cartels are playing in Honduras, the United States should promote the creation of a bilateral Honduran–Mexican security pact.
- **Engaging the private sector and civil society groups in Honduras by promoting free-market policies and democratic reforms.** America’s efforts in promoting free-market policies should not stop at CAFTA–DR. It should engage the private sector to expand trade relations beyond it. The United States should encourage dialogue among civil society groups that contribute to regional democratic governance.

1. Rodrigo Serrano-Berthet and Humberto Lopez, “Crime and Violence in Central America: A Development Challenge,” World Bank, 2011, http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTLAC/Resources/FINAL_VOLUME_I_ENGLISH_CrimeAndViolence.pdf, (accessed December 19, 2013).

2. For information on the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, see Clare Ribando Seelke and Kristin M. Finklea, “U.S.-Mexican Security Cooperation: The Mérida Initiative and Beyond,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, June 12, 2013, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R41349.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2013).

3. Karen Hooper, “The Mexican Drug Cartel Threat in Central America,” Stratfor Global Intelligence, November 17, 2011, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20111116-mexican-drug-cartel-threat-central-america> (accessed December 19, 2013).

4. Michael Hoefler, Nancy Rytina, and Bryan Baker, “Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2011,” Department of Homeland Security, Office of Immigration Statistics, Population Estimates, March 2012, http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/statistics/publications/ois_ill_pe_2011.pdf (accessed December 19, 2013).

5. U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Status of Funding for the Central America Regional Security Initiative,” GAO-13-295R, January 30, 2013, <http://www.gao.gov/assets/660/651675.pdf> (accessed December 19, 2013).

- **Reevaluating its foreign assistance portfolio to guarantee the root causes of instability such as citizen security and weak democratic institutions are prioritized.** U.S. agencies should improve coordination with national and international nongovernmental organizations and civil society groups to provide strategic, targeted assistance.
- **Working with regional democratic partners, particularly the Pacific Alliance trade bloc (Colombia, Mexico, Chile, and Peru), to bring attention to the growing tide of authoritative populism in the region.**

Moving Forward. While the November 24 elections may have brought Honduras a new president, the myriad of destabilizing issues facing it remain. In order to provide Honduras with proper security assistance, the United States needs to develop a policy specifically tailored to the country that, similar to Plan Colombia and the Mérida Initiative, is comprehensive, consistent, and targeted.

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